

## CONTRIBUTIONS OF MUSICOLOGIST SHRI DEEPAK S. RAJA ON 'RĀGA-NESS' IN HINDUSTANI CLASSICAL MUSIC

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### Abstract

The works of musicologist, Sh Deepak S. Raja, on Hindustani classical music are useful for academic and also non-academic readers. They give an insight into the myriad dimensions of Hindustani classical music in English language. The depth and connotation with which he has propounded his views on *Rāga* and *Rāga-ness* needs to be appreciated by all who value our rich musical traditions and culture.

Method: The descriptive-evaluative method has been used.

**Key words:** Archetypes, Melodic, Musician, *Rāga*, *Rāga-ness*, *Rasa*.

### INTRODUCTION

Shri Deepak S Raja, born in 1948, is a contemporary noted musicologist, musician and author. His first book 'Hindustani Music: A Tradition in Transition', was published in 2005. His other books are 'Khayal Vocalism: Continuity within Change' (2009); 'Hindustani Music Today'(2012); 'The Rāga-ness of Rāgas'(2016) and 'The Musician and His Art'(2019). In 2009, he was granted a Senior Research Fellowship by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India. For his contribution to Hindustani music, he was awarded the 'Vasandrao Deshpande Smruti Sanman' in 2013. He runs a respected blog on Hindustani music: <http://swaratala.blogspot.com>. He is a sitar and surbahar player of the Etawah Gharana. He also studied *khayāl* vocalism of the Jaipur-Atrauli Gharana. A multi-faceted personality, he was the Editor of Business India, and Secretary General of the Indian Newspaper Society

His contributions to Hindustani classical music are accessible through his books, speeches, lec-dems, workshops and articles. His explanations, expressions and depiction of innovative ideas, reveal the influence and use of basics of various fields of study. He has been able to successfully use his analytical bent of mind and insightful intellect to bring forth a new approach and thinking on different aspects of Hindustani classical music.

He has undertaken case studies, which are discussion on the *rāgas* he had studied, when he was a 'Repertoire Analyst' for "Indian Archives Music Ltd.", New York. In this capacity, he had interviewed several musicians and studied one hundred *rāgas*, recorded by over 45 musicians (Hindustani classical) on 8 instruments and all the genres of Hindustani vocal music. These case-studies helped him on throwing light on the concept of *rāga-ness*; being further authenticated by references to many scholarly texts - both ancient and modern.

His perspectives on *rāgas/rāga-ness* have received wide acclaim and appreciation. He has dealt in detail on this little-discussed, yet very vital topic, in an intelligent and imaginative manner. His presentation and elaboration of this concept has produced lively debate and

discussion and is a thought-provoking subject worthy of research. Hence Shri Raja's contributions, in this respect, are enumerated below:

### **THE MEANING AND ORIGIN OF RĀGA**

*Rāga* has strong emotional connotations and is described as a melodic presentation of an emotional idea, and acting as a means for its communication. Its melodic structure is compact enough to make it recognizable, but flexible enough to make it conducive for adding improvisational features. *Rāga* is specific to Indian classical music only and not found anywhere else in the world. It is a reflection of Indian genius, Indian culture and society.

Rāgas evolved naturally from songs. Shri Raja defines a song as “a stable construct incorporating poetry, melody and rhythm, which is a self-sufficient piece of music, requiring no validation beyond its direct appeal to a listener's heart”.<sup>1</sup> These songs became embedded as pleasing and poignant sensations in the societal memory. Similar types of songs were grouped together and their common melodic and emotional features were earmarked as artistic codifications, which were then identified as rāgas.

### **RĀGA-NESS**

*Rāga-ness* has been described as '*rāga tattva*', '*feel of the rāga*' or '*essence of the rāga*'. The *rāga-tattva* is like the 'Divine Presence', expressing in diverse forms, like *dhrupad*, *khyāl*, *thumri* and others.

*Rāga*, the soul of Indian classical music has been variously defined and described over the ages. But, there is an element of 'something' intangible and special over and above all the attributes describing the *rāga*. That 'special feature', i.e. *Raga-ness*, is what gives the *rāga* its mysterious nature and adds the quality of *rāga-ness* to the *rāga*. By *rāga-ness* Shri Raja implies – every element that goes into making the *rāga* - a *rāga*. The pursuit of *rāga-ness* is a constant contemplative endeavour of all performing musicians - to establish and manifest the inherent quality of the *rāga*.

### **VARIOUS ASPECTS OF RĀGA IN THE CONTEXT OF RĀGA -NESS**

***Rāga Grammar and Rāga Music as a Language*** : Shri Raja has pointed out features that show music to be a language and a *rāga* to be a certain kind of 'linguistic statement'. For those conversant with *rāga* music, it is a kind of specialised language for triggering an emotional response. Like a language allows proliferation of different genres of literature (short story, novel and poetry etc.), *rāga* music also is expressed through different genres like *dhrupad*, *khyāl*, *tarana* and others.

Thus, *rāga* is being seen as a statement using selected number of *svaras* to build a selected set of patterns and arranged in a compatible and expected sequence to achieve its objective of communication.

Musicological research is inclined towards of application of linguistic rules of grammar for understanding the melodic structure of *rāgas*. For example, '*sruti*' / '*svara*' is analogous to 'word', '*rāga*' to 'sentence', '*vādi*' to 'verb' and '*samvādi*' to 'adverb'. The idea of 'skeletal phraseology' of a *rāga* is referred to as '*chalan*'. One of the *chalan* phrases called '*pakad*' is the 'distinctive signature' of the *rāga*.

The melodic canvas of the *rāga* has the regions of *purvānga*' (lower tetrachord), '*madhyānga*' (mid-octave region) and '*uttarānga*' (upper tetrachord). The syntax and punctuation in a *rāga* combine all these elements to make a complete statement of musical communication.

Each *rāga* has certain qualities, which distinguish it from other *rāgas*. In Hindustani music, the musician is both a performer and composer. The rules of *rāga* grammar, makes the performance coherent and understandable and are important because considerable improvisational liberty is permitted to the performers. To help in comprehension, Shri Raja has categorized *rāga* grammar as having two aspects - 'Melodic grammar' and 'Aesthetic grammar'.

Melodic grammar refers to the choice, arrangement and relative weightage given to *svaras* in a *rāga* and adherence to it is compulsory for a musician. The Aesthetic grammar is connected partly to Melodic grammar and partly to '*rasa*' aspect of the *rāga*. It is prone to be followed and interpreted in various ways and is more subject to change over time, than melodic grammar. Whereas adherence to melodic grammar is mandatory, complying with aesthetic grammar is desirable, in order to create a special aural and emotional impact in the performance.

Relevant to aesthetic grammar, is Sh Raja's assertion that each *rāga* has its home in a particular region of the melodic canvas of *Purvānga*, *Madhyānga* and *Uttarānga*. A survey and study done by Shri Raja gave him an appreciation of the grammatical and aesthetic importance of the '*madhyānga*' as a specific area of melodic significance. "*In this perspective, svara-level, phrase-level, and octave-level specifications are collectively significant for the expression of a rāga's aesthetic intent.*"<sup>2</sup>

### **RĀGA DESCRIBED AS A 'PSYCHO-ACOUSTIC HYPOTHESIS' AND ARCHETYPAL ENTITIES:**

Rāga is eternally a hypothesis, which undergoes a remarkable evaluation on the occasion of its performance. Shri Raja's view is, "that associations of the sound patterns of the *rāga* with their meaning reside in the collective unconscious, just as the associations of words in a spoken or written language reside in memory of the culture in which the language has evolved".<sup>3</sup>

A *rāga* has been described by Shri Raja as a ‘formless form’; ‘formless’ because it denotes a potentiality for an artistically meaningful and emotionally appealing presentation; and a ‘form’ because it has specific and identifiable boundaries. In a performance of *rāga* music, the musician endeavours to bring forth the ‘formless form’, residing in the societal-artistic consciousness and communicate it in a manner to induce an emotional impact in the listeners. On each such occasion, some patterns get added or removed, vis-à-vis the whole reservoir of melodic ideas. Thus, a *rāga* and its performance, mutually shape each other.

Expounding on it further, Shri Raja refers to *rāgas* as archetypal entities. Archetype implies a prototype or model on the lines of which other comparable things are fashioned. “*Basically an archetype is an empty nothing pregnant with an innate tendency of shaping things.*”<sup>4</sup> Archetypes are essentially primordial images; formless forms (as relatable in the previous paragraph); appearing in various ways, but still retaining their identity; receive collective acceptance, universally, by a culture and their essence is imbibed in an unconscious and intuitive manner.

Shri Raja compares *rāgas* to be archetypes similar to deities in our culture. He mentions “Like deities, *rāgas* possess identifying features with their emotional associations embedded in the cultural memory”<sup>5</sup>.

Examples of Archetypal qualities of *Rāgas* as mentioned by Shri Raja is mentioned as below:

- *Sandhi Prakāsa rāgas*, i.e. *rāgas* which are set to perform at around sunrise or sunset are characterized by the use of *Komal* (flat) *Re* (2<sup>nd</sup> note) and *Komal* (flat) *Dha* (6<sup>th</sup> note). These notes make the nature of the *rāgas* solemn and is like an invocation to Sun, who is revered deity, in our Vedic culture.
- The melodic phrases of *rāgas* Bahār and Malhār, i.e. *ni dha ni sa (komal ni, suddha dha, suddha ni sa)*. While Bahār reflects the arrival of spring after the cold and dry winters, Malhār signals the advent of rainy season after the intensely hot summers in North India. Shri Raja mentions “*In both these seasons, nature renews itself and justifies expressions of euphoria...Indians effortlessly imbue this phrase with the entire community’s experience of these seasons*”<sup>6</sup>
- The ragas *Shankara* and *Durgā*- named after the two great commanding deities - incorporate combinations of poetry, melody and rhythm so as to visualize and communicate the attributes of these revered Gods to all associated with Indian culture.

However, Shri Raja makes an important point when he mentions that all the above mentioned examples, hence, establish *rāgas* as “*culture specific archetypes*”.<sup>7</sup> While musicians and listeners outside of our culture may appreciate the *rāga*’s beauty in its *swara* combinations and presentations, only an Indian born and brought up in this celebrated culture, can associate archetypal associations to these *rāgas*.

**Rāgas and their combinations/chemistry:** Sh Raja has presented an interesting approach, using the basics of chemistry to clarify the nature of *rāga* transformations, which often take place when a *rāga* interacts with other *rāgas* of the *rāga* universe (each having their own individual melodic characteristic). The features of the base *rāga* gets modified, retaining some original and imbibing some new ones, and the derivative melodic entity has been described by Sh Raja (in the language of chemistry), as - allotropes, compounds and emulsion.

Allotropes are diverse physical forms of the same element (as coal and diamond are allotropes of carbon). An example of such allotrope *rāga* is ‘*Enayatkhani Kanada*’, which is melodically enhanced version of ‘*Darbari Kanada*’.

A compound *rāga* is formed when two *rāgas* merge with each other – either through directional or scalar fusion. This type of *rāga* modification is common and in such compounds the melodic qualities of each *rāga* are retained. Examples of directionally fused *rāgas* are the ‘*Kānadā*’ group *rāgas* (except for Darbari Kannada) like ‘*Kāfi Kanada*’ and ‘*Chandra Kānadā*’. Examples of scalar fused *rāgas* are ‘*Bageshri-Bahār*’, ‘*Bhairav-Bahār*’ and ‘*Desa-Malhār*’.

Emulsion in chemistry is a light diffusion of tiny droplets of one liquid in another liquid, in which it does not dissolve. In the context of *rāgas*, Shri Raja refers to Emulsion as a kind of *rāga* transformation in which phrases of constituent *rāgas* are arranged in a pattern and without any effect on the scalar canvas. Thus, the fusion of the *rāgas* is done on the basis of fusion and interlocking of the distinctive phrases of each *rāga* and not in merging of the melodic scale.

*Rāga*-emulsion form is most complex and challenging because of the regular *rāga* shifting it requires. Example ‘*Sampurna Mālkauns*’ has a blend of 3 *rāgas*, i.e. *Bāgeswari*, *Mālkauns* and *Kāfi*. This *rāga* was immortalized by the Jaipur Atrauli gharana Maestro Smt. Kesarbai Kelkar.

According to Shri Raja, *rāga* chemistry appears to be taxing for today’s audiences. Hence, we see a preference for ‘*Rāga-malika*’ (which is a continuous presentation of a series of *rāgas*). However, this trend “*could be depleting the vastness and richness of the living rāga tradition.*”<sup>8</sup>

**Rāga and emotions (9 Rasas):** The *rāga-rasa* relationship is a key factor in our understanding of *rāga* and *rāga-ness*. *Rasa* literally means an extract or essence. The context of *rasa* in *rāga* is to heighten the awareness of the emotions (*bhāvas*) in the audience. In other words, Shri Raja refers to *rāga* as “*a melodic representation of an emotional idea*”.<sup>9</sup>

The first eight *sthāyī bhāvas* (stable emotions) are mentioned in “*Natyashastra*” and the ninth added by Abhinavagupta are collectively known as *nava rasa*. The nine rasas being *Rati*

(love), *Hasya* (mirth), *Shoka* (sorrow), *Krodha* (anger), *Utsaha* (enthusiasm), *Bhaya* (fear), *Jhugupsa* (disgust), *Vismaya* (wonder) and *Sama* (tranquil). Later additions to the prominent list involved ‘*bhakti*’ (devotion) and ‘*vatsalya*’ (mother’s love) – which were also added.

The ninth *rasa*, ‘*shānta*’, according to Abhinavgupta must be rated as the highest – as it makes the spectator achieve a state of bliss and connect with his Divine Self. The earlier eight *rasas* were limited to worldly aims and did not encompass the attainment of *moksha* (ultimate liberation).

A hypothesis suggested by Sh Raja is - “If the *rasa* experience is an awareness-altering experience, the pursuit of *rasa*, as life’s work, can be a personality-transforming vocation. Its aim and result would be the attainment of bliss as a permanent state of Being. This hypothesis is plausible because the enfeebling of the *sthāyī bhavas*’ is explicitly considered by the Indian philosophical tradition as a mark of wisdom and enlightenment. Such a person would answer to the ideal of the *trigunātīta* in the *Bhagawad-Gita*.”<sup>10</sup>

***Raga and Spirituality/Transcendence:*** Shri Raja informs that he asked the great sitār maestro Ustad Vilayat Khan to share his vision of *rāga-ness*. According to the Ustad, “*A rāga is much bigger than the collective imagination of all the musicians who have ever lived and will ever be born. We struggle all our lives to catch a glimpse of a rāga. Maybe, once in a life-time, on a day when God is smiling upon us, we may get a fleeting glimpse of it. And, on that day, we can feel that we have validated our lives as musicians*”.<sup>11</sup>

The *rāga* performance is thus a meditative act and the musician shares a worshipful relationship with the *rāga*. The musician invokes, prayerfully, to the ‘formless form’ of the *rāga*, imploring it to manifest its divine presence in the melodic formation.

“All true artists have some feeling of this kind, some sense that they are the intermediaries between a higher world and this physical existence.... In their creation they did not put forward their personality as the most important factor; they considered their work as an offering to the Divine. The songs of Mirabai and the music of Thyagaraja, the poetic literature built up by her (India’s) devotees, saints and Rishis rank among the world’s greatest artistic possessions.”<sup>12</sup>

“Music is a means of expressing certain thoughts, feelings, emotions, aspirations. There is even a region where all these movements exist and from there, as they are brought down, they take a musical form.”<sup>13</sup>

## **RĀGA -NESS IN VARIOUS ASPECTS OF RĀGA PRESENTATION**

**Rāga in the context of Rāga –ness:** According to Shri Raja, “a *rāga* does not exist in isolation, but takes shape in performance, and its boundaries are redrawn – if ever so imperceptibly – by every rendition.”<sup>14</sup>

**Rāga-ness in ‘Ālāp’:** The *ālāp* has a prefatory and revealing role in the *rāga* exposition. The *ālāp* gives the musician improvisatory freedom and is the paramount factor in assessing the quality of his / her musicianship. Sh Raja has highlighted the mystical aspect of *ālāp*, which being free from the rhythmic component, is comparable with the soul freed from the body. The *ālāp* gives an emphasis to the restful, calming and tranquil potentiality of a *rāga* recital and transports the listeners into a meditative state. In this way the ‘*ālāp*’ also increases the chances of awaking the *rasa* possibilities inherent in the *rāga*.

Shri Raja writes, “*The ‘ālāp’ is the ‘Form and Feeling department’ of Hindustani music. In short, it is the deepest journey a musician can give you into the soul of a rāga and indeed, into his own musical mind. Once the ‘ālāp’ is over the music enters the region of entertainment. The latter may further a musician’s professional interests but, the former validates his existence.*”<sup>15</sup>

A discouraging trend now perceivable is that due to audience immaturity and lack of patience, and also artistic lethargy, the ‘*ālāp*’ in the ‘*non-Dhrupad*’ category is slowly dwindling in usage.

**Rāga-ness in *Bandish*:** The teaching of various compositions (*bandish*) in each *rāga* is critical for bestowing knowledge of *rāgas*. The *bandish* is the pre-composed element in Hindustani music. It combines the melodic, rhythmic and lyrical elements into a cohesive self-contained pre-composed music item. The *bandish* acts as a moderator of the *rāga*’s exposition in the performance and harmonises the whole *rāga* presentation into a well organised and fulfilling completeness.

Shri Raja expresses doubt that the *rāga* is the ‘commanding form’ in Hindustani music, playing a dominant role like the composition in Western classical music.” *Whether in the context of an individual performance or as a cultural force, the rāga does not have an autonomous status. The rāga acts largely through the agency of the bandish, which holds the rendition together and, the bandish alongwith the improvisations that it hosts, tends to shape and re-shape the rāga’s personality each time it is performed.*”<sup>16</sup>

The *mukhadā* of the *bandish* is the starting lyrical-musical expression ending at the *sam* – the first beat of the rhythmic cycle. The *mukhadā* plays a crucial role and is the centre-piece of the composition being repeated at fixed intervals and binds the performance in an effective manner. It is the ‘face’ of both the *bandish* and of the whole performance. “...*there exists an aesthetic linkage between the mukhadās, bandishes and the consensual personalities of rāgas. Mukhadās shape bandishes; bandishes’ shape performances. And, performances are constantly shaping and reshaping the melodic personality of the rāga. A rāga is after all, a consensual melodic entity.*”<sup>17</sup>

Sh Raja conducted a pilot study to assess measures of principal propensity as yardstick of a *rāga* '*anga prādhānya*', indicating the place on the melodic canvas in which the *rāga* is prone to focus its melodic activity (Reference of the same also mentioned in the raga grammar section of this paper). These samples and the methodology were also utilized for finding out the regional spread of the '*mukhadā*' in order to evaluate the connection of the *mukhadā* in relation to the entire *bandish*.

**Rāga-ness of 'Tāns':** *Tāns* are 'post-Dhrupad' manifestations in Hindustani classical music and are mostly found in *khyāl* and instrumental music recitals. *Tāns* occupy a great deal of the time and energies of the musicians in their performances and the skillful execution of *tāns* gives evidence of the performing artist's virtuosity. *Tāns* are of various types – 'Linear', 'Narrative', 'Symmetric', 'Geometric' and 'Kaleidoscopic' *Tāns*. A combination of two of these *tāns* has a magical effect, since they are intoned at a frequency of above 240 intonations per minute and are performed at the end of the *rāga* exposition. The unique aspect of *tāns* is their intricacy, amazing speed and precision, which make them an important characteristic of *rāga-ness*.

However, now, the *rāga-ness* of *tāns* is being weakened owing to too much focus and use of only linear, geometric and symmetric types of *tāns* and the disregard of narrative *tāns*. Such an approach has led to display of stunning speeds, but has compromised the features of melodic pattern; its *svara* density has caused neglect of the '*alpatva-bahutva*' need of phrasing; the difficulty in establishing a resemblance of locational or directional tendency, thereby preventing the *vādi* and *samvādi* from playing their justified role.

Sh Raja has pointed out that *tāns* appear to be part of 'musicianship' department and *ālāp* appears to belong to the 'musicality' department. 'Musicianship', Sh Raja opines refers to the professional interest and approach of the musician; while 'musicality' is that aspect of music-creation in which the performing artist prays to the *rāga* form to materialize in the rendition.

**Rāga-ness of Musicians:** *Rāgas* are changing and evolving melodic entities. Eminent musicians leave a mark of their distinctiveness on the *rāgas* they perform. For the sake of simplification, they may introduce phrases not strictly adhering to the grammar invoked, but bearing consonance with the *rāga*'s melodic disposition. Thus evolution of *rāgas* is brought about by the creativity of the maestros and its favorable reception by the audience. "In a performing tradition, theory can document practice, but it cannot expect to dictate it." <sup>18</sup>

In light of the above, Shri Raja has delved into the personalities of musicians in order to ascertain the impact that the inner nature will have in presentation of a raga. The work of Carl Jung, psycho-analyst, has been instrumental in identifying 16 personality types – representing a refined measurement of the introversion-extroversion dimension of personality and the system is known as "MBTI" (Myers and Briggs Type Indicator). Shri Raja has described the 3 types of artist's personalities in terms of 16 MBTI types. He has shown the correspondence



between these categories and broader frameworks for classifying personalities or motivation traits. He has sub-classified the artists into 3 dominant tendencies:

- The Artist-Idealist – ‘Contemplation’ dominant personality
- The Artist-Performer – ‘Expression’ dominant personality
- The Artist-Giver – ‘Communication’ dominant personality

Shri Raja has also applied ‘Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs’ (8 types – the lowest to the highest) on the three types of musical personalities – showing thereby the driving force operating in the musician’s personality during a performance.

Hindu philosophy defines three modes of existence (‘gunas’ – ‘sattva’, ‘rajas’ and ‘tamas’) from which 3 personality types – ‘*sāttvika*’, ‘*rājasika*’ and ‘*tāmasika*’ are derived.

Shri Raja has described:

- The *sāttvika* musician (contemplation dominant personality) who relates to the *rāga* as a ‘formless-form’ and his music has the qualities of humbleness, tranquility, joyfulness, reverence and wisdom.
- The *rājasika* musician (expression dominant personality) connects to the *rāga* with the object of controlling it.
- The *tāmasika* musician (communication dominant personality) associates with the *rāga* from the viewpoint of adhering to the minimal required expectations

Sh Raja’s view is that a hierarchical approach to the three modes is not justified because society is heterogeneous and embraces people having different hopes and requirements from classical music and also depending on the different occasions and phases of life. According to Shri Raja, every type of music is justified in view of its ability to fulfill the demands and needs of audience, who derive satisfaction from it. The three categories are not rigid entities. Most outstanding musicians would be seen to belong to the *rājasika* category, but nevertheless also show proneness for *sāttvika* or *tāmasika*. These analogies are meant for broadening our outlook and perspectives on this subject.

**Impact of Digital Revolution on Raga aspects and Raga-Ness:** Commenting on the impact of digitisation on *rāga*-ness, Shri Raja writes, “*Rāga* grammar can be deciphered and programmed. *Tālas* can be programmed. The architecture of the genres can be programmed. Bandishes and compatible improvisatory movements can be generated under program control. Robotic arms can deliver an integrated *rāga* based performance on any instrument of choice. A synthesized human voice can do the same for vocal music. The universe of *rāgas* can explode. Untapped melodic patterns can be identified and systematized under program control. Innumerable new *rāgas* can be born. New *tālas* can be created.”<sup>19</sup> Sh Raja thus

brings forth the uncertainty prevailing with regard to continuance of treasured traditions of Hindustani classical music.

## CONCLUSION

Shri Raja has examined the grammatical, aesthetic and performance-linked aspects of *rāga-ness* in a refreshing manner combining elements both of modernity and tradition. His intellectual approach to the subject of *rāga* and *rāga-ness*, shows incisive methods of analysis alongwith clear vision. The process by which many and diffuse elements contribute to creating and establishing a *rāga's* essence or *rāga-ness* has extensively and comprehensively been presented by Shri Raja. Moreover he has presented his *rāga* perspectives in the English language, which is of immense value to English readers – in India and abroad. Foreign audiences too, appreciate his scholarly works, which gives them authentic information on Indian musicological concepts and ideas.

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